

Responsibility and its derivatives – going beyond the ‘standard’ critique of neoliberalism

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Neoliberalism, the economic (and societal) form of governance, is widely described through one of its core mechanisms: responsibilization, the ‘divestiture of obligations from the state onto individuals,’ cultivating a self-empowered person (p. 2f), a responsible citizen (p.4). In this very worthwhile volume, the editors and contributors bust this strong link between responsibility and neoliberalism with a wide range of empirical (and theoretical) observations of how responsibility can be found to work differently in contemporary society. The contributions dispute the claim that responsibilization is always a practice of the state stepping out of its original responsibility, often clad in a narrative of enabling personal choice and autonomy; instead, they first find other loci for responsibility and self-cultivation completely outside of the state nexus (9). Secondly, the authors also claim that (complete) autonomy might not always be desired or achieved but that the striving for it might in fact result in (new) communities and relations (10). Lastly, ‘care for others’ might spring from responsibility as an ‘enduring commitment between parties’ (12) – to be found in settings from kinship to education or healthcare.

Altogether, the volume is very strong in finding the holes in the neoliberal logic of (self) responsibilization: where does it stop? What are its unintended consequences? They argue that in

fact the analytic of responsibility is not the issue (in neoliberalism); instead we need to ask: ‘who is held responsible by whom for what’ (16, 34)?

One of the biggest strengths of the volume is the variety of ‘locations’ and ‘sectors’ that the contributors engage in their search for alternative kinds of responsibility. On the one hand, we learn from Zigon comparing different models of (addiction) harm reduction to (empirically and theoretically) sharpen our understanding of responsibility (linear versus networked and open, 65f); on the other hand, several studies focus on the more widely thought of context of corporate responsibilization with its ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR, Smith, Ch. 5) and (corporate) audit culture as extended to for instance the university (Shore, Ch. 4). Other contributors zoom out to a comprehensive systems-approach asking the question ‘who is responsible’ looking at public entities (from supra-state actors to states and individual administrators), corporations and (individual) citizens alike in contexts as diverse as air pollution (Tnka, Ch. 3), missing people in Cyprus (Davis, Ch. 6), war crimes in Sierra Leone (Shaw, Ch. 7) or nuclear tests (Trundle, Ch.10)

Various different vectors of the anthropological imagination are thought through with the lenses of responsibility, responsibilization and their derivatives: from a focus on medicine and science (Chs 2, 3, 8 and 10), economy and business (3-5) and kinship (8-10) to the state which features implicitly in most accounts. Only the element of religion is almost completely absent (beyond observations about the moral discourse surrounding HIV in Ch 8) which is surprising given the strong (historical) basis for responsibility (or ethics) in this sector (cf. Laidlaw 2014). While I appreciate the extension of the analysis – something that is also at the heart of my institute – a slightly more direct genealogy (beyond the introduction) might have benefited some of the contributions and the overall flow.

Overall, I found the volume particularly illuminating for researchers in the realm of medical anthropology or the anthropology of care and health. Zigon’s chapter (Ch. 2) starts off specifically strongly and with a lot of nuance on a topic I have been thinking about in my own work, too: safe injection programs as part of harm reduction for drug users. He critiques the ‘standard approach’

to harm reduction producing (neoliberal) restrictive individual responsibility and puts it against the ‘Vancouver model.’ In his eyes, the latter more closely resembles a networked landscape of services and open entry points much more aligned to support oftentimes chaotic and non-linear people struggling with addiction. Similarly, Trnka (Ch. 3) takes up the question of air pollution in the Czech Republic and asks: who has a responsibility to care for the citizens who themselves are hard-beaten by rising unemployment and hardship? Is the state the ‘ultimate moral agent’ (p.76) and how much does the steel industry have to pay up? Paradoxically, how much individual responsibility to *protest* and put public pressure on these corporate and state actors do citizens have to shoulder (p. 83)? Responsibility – individual and otherwise – features in a great variety of unexpected and intertwined ways in Trnka’s story – which is also true for Adam’s chapter (Ch. 8) on HIV. Adam shows how tackling HIV has been framed as a collective goal (of a healthy population) that can only be achieved by focusing on individual responsibility to practice ‘safe sex’ (without having to invoke communitarianism or altruism, p. 187), if need be enforced through punitive measures. In fact, much of this framing has proven both ineffective and insufficient (p. 190) because it does not consider the complex role of competing motivations based on emotions or kinship ties. Adam’s chapter seems reasonably close to other case studies of tracing responsabilization, of deflecting responsibility from corporate and state actors (p. 192). Which makes me ask: how *different* are some of the contributions to this volume to the more traditional studies of neoliberal responsabilization critiqued by the editors? Absolutely, the understanding of what responsibility is and who in fact is responsabilized is very nuanced; but what about the flip side of responsabilization, de-responsibilization, beyond the state (or the corporate)? What about situations where responsibility is taken away from citizens? This takes me to my last question, Can responsibility also be a good thing, something empowering – for instance when responsibility comes with rights, e.g. for (corporate) board members (to oversee) or for union members or even just citizens (to vote)?

Despite some of the – necessary – question marks the volume leaves open, it surely in its entirety makes one point very strongly: not all responsibility is the same – and it is certainly not all neoliberal; there is a multiplicity of forms reinforcing, undercutting, existing alongside, conflicting and intersecting the ‘classic’ neoliberal form (p. 22). This empirically grounded volume is overall

very strong in increasing our theoretical vocabulary and analytical prowess to overcome repeating the same critique of neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism.

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